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International Naval Cooperation during the Spanish Civil War

By ADAM B. SIEGEL

Among ideologues on the left and the right, the Spanish civil war was perhaps the most controversial conflict of the 20th century. Moreover, European powers could not ignore the fact that it posed the greatest threat to peace since World War I. Spain's strategic location, the rise of fascism as a military threat, and the presence of over 100,000 foreign nationals drew international naval forces into Spanish waters. Thus the conflict entangled foreign powers which, in addition

to sparring with Republican and Nationalist forces, became involved in ad hoc multinational operations from support to combatants to interdiction patrols, antisubmarine operations, and noncombatant evacuation—portending what today is known as *coalitions of the willing*.

It's War

The Spanish military leadership launched an attempt to overthrow the left-wing Republican government on July 17, 1936. France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and the United States had naval forces in Spanish waters or en route within days. They were joined by Argentina, Mexico, Portugal, and Yugoslavia by the end of the year.

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In line with a long history of such actions, the navies involved in evacuation operations cooperated in communications, intelligence, and logistic support; removal of each others' nationals; diplomatic *demarches* or joint actions against Republican or Nationalist activities; and cordiality to reduce the tensions and burdens of patrolling Spanish waters.

Cooperation emerged from the start. The first messages the U.S. consul at Barcelona sent to the State Department, calling for the evacuation of American citizens, went via the Royal Navy. Most Americans had already been evacuated aboard other nations' ships by the time a U.S.

merchant ship reached Barcelona several days later. In November, the Germans asked the British to assist them in evacuating their citizens from southern Spain. This pattern continued through the

war. The U.S. Navy evacuated over 1,500 people, of whom only 633 were American citizens. The German navy evacuated 9,300 in July and August 1936, half nationals from third countries. The combined navies removed 50,000 foreigners and 10,000 Spaniards by the end of 1936.

Naval services often collaborated. Professional courtesies included steps to relieve the tensions of the day. Thus, for example, U.S. warships frequently had foreign officers aboard for movies—with German ships providing the beer. Such attitudes extended into the operations in Spanish waters, with honors exchanged among the numerous foreign ships anchored in Spanish harbors.

Cooperation often extended to giving advice and informing other navies of local conditions. On July 30, 1936, the captain of the German warship *Albatross*, which had just entered Bilbao, was preparing to send an armed party ashore to protect evacuation efforts. The captain of a British ship in the harbor quickly dissuaded him. The Germans were surprised to learn that, far from being occupied by armed belligerents, Bilbao was quiet. Sending armed patrols ashore would have done more harm than good. Thanks to the British, the German captain avoided an embarrassing incident.

Freedom of the Seas

The civil war threatened general navigation from its earliest days, with attacks on merchant and neutral warships beginning in early July. Crews took appropriate steps. British ships displayed floodlit white ensigns on their turrets. The U.S. Navy directed its vessels near the Spanish coast to display additional colors. Despite such efforts attacks on neutrals increased. Nations protested to both sides in the civil war and warships were ordered to fire on attacking warplanes. A plane attempted to bomb *USS Kane* on August 30, 1936. The log recorded:

At 1610 unidentified, tri-motored, low black winged monoplane approached ship from stern and dropped 2 bombs which exploded 1,000 yards astern. Went to general quarters, and maneuvered on various courses at various speeds to avoid bombs. At 1625 plane returned and dropped 1 bomb, distance of miss 150 yards. At 1626 opened fire on plane with anti-aircraft gun, fired 2 rounds. At 1631 plane circled back toward ship, resumed fire on plane with anti-aircraft gun. At 1632 plane dropped 3 bombs which exploded 200 yards abeam to starboard. At 1634 ceased firing, total rounds expended 10 rounds 3 inch 23 cal. SPD 2235 service shrapnel ammunition, no casualties and apparently no casualties inflicted on plane. At 1645 plane retreated in northeasterly direction and disappeared. . . .¹

The question of belligerent rights, such as the authority to institute a blockade or stop ships on the high seas, remained throughout the war and frequently provoked naval responses. The Republicans suggested that they would blockade all ports in Nationalist hands in August 1936.

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Refugees en route to France, 1936.



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Since they did not recognize international belligerent status, the French protested that this “police measure” would undermine legitimate freedom of commerce. French warships would not permit merchant ships to be diverted. Britain announced a similar policy. The German navy pursued an activist approach. It seized two Republican vessels at one point and turned them over to Nationalist forces as part of the pressure on the Republicans to release the seized German merchant ship *Palos*. The Germans appeared ready to invoke gunboat diplomacy to protect their interests in Spain.

Naval operations included intervention in support of both sides. This was particularly evident in the case of German and Italian backing of the Nationalists and Soviet support for the Republicans. The German presence was the most pronounced. In late July, a German squadron entered the Nationalist port of Ceuta for “a joyous celebration.” Such public demonstrations of implicit German recognition of Nationalist legitimacy escalated throughout the autumn, with

formal recognition coming in November. Along with advisors ashore, the Germans provided technical support to Nationalist ships. They also began supporting military action. This complicity highlights the complex and often duplicitous nature of naval cooperation. At the same time German vessels were anchored in harbors to evacuate foreign nationals or support German diplomats, they observed Republican naval activity and reported it to the Nationalists.

Italian navy involvement included resupplying Nationalist ships and collecting intelligence. From late October through November 1936, two Italian destroyers patrolled the straits of Sicily to report on shipping from the Soviet Union crossing the Mediterranean to Spain. Italian participation was generally more extensive and overt than German efforts. Thus Italian ships played a direct role in the fighting “on seven dark nights in January and February 1937. . . bombarding Spanish ports.” Republican forces recovered Italian shell fragments, confirming “a widespread assumption

Republicans and Nationalists

Spain's Second Republic, proclaimed after the fall of the monarchy in 1931, was at first dominated by middle class liberals and moderate socialists whose policies threatened the privileged class. Large estates were redistributed, church and state were separated, and the government proclaimed an antimilitarist policy. With their interests and ideals under attack, the landed aristocracy, the church, officer corps, monarchists, and a new fascist party (*Falange*), opposed the fledgling administration. The government's idealistic reforms also failed to satisfy left-wing radicals and did little to ameliorate the lot of the lower classes. Right-wing forces gained a majority in the 1933 elections, leading to a succession of weak coalition governments.

After a left-wing electoral victory in 1936, revolutionary sentiment on the right was consolidated. In July, General Francisco Franco led an army revolt in Morocco. Rightist groups rebelled in Spain, and most of the army joined the revolutionary (Nationalist) camp. By November, the Nationalists had Madrid under siege. A new Republican government under Francisco Largo Caballero organized loyalist forces to defend the city. They were aided by international brigades—foreign volunteers, many of them communists.

Throughout the war, Germany and Italy aided Franco with equipment, supplies, military advisors, and technicians. The Spanish republic became dependent on the Soviet Union for logistical support.

Late in 1938, Franco mounted a major offensive against Catalonia, seizing Barcelona in January. After the loss of Catalonia the Republican cause became hopeless. The victorious Nationalists entered Madrid on April 1, 1939. Combat fatalities on both sides during the conflict were 285,000.

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General Francisco Franco with staff.

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Nationalist sailors with Italian torpedo.

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British, French, and Italian warships, Barcelona.

their greatest concern was to avoid a general European war

of Italian responsibility." Despite this, "Italian admirals outwardly appeared puzzled when British naval officers in Spanish waters raised the issue."²

To avoid publicly flaunting nonintervention agreements and minimize the likelihood of other nations intervening to assist the Republican government, the Germans and Italians typically avoided obvious signs of military support. Their

desire to advance the Nationalist cause, combined with their need for secrecy, rapidly led to a reliance on submarine activity. Italian submarine patrols with Spanish officers aboard began on November 8, 1936. The Germans also dispatched two boats, but operational orders were so restrictive due to fears of international complications from mistakenly attacking British navy or other foreign ships that the submarines accomplished nothing and were ordered home on December 11.

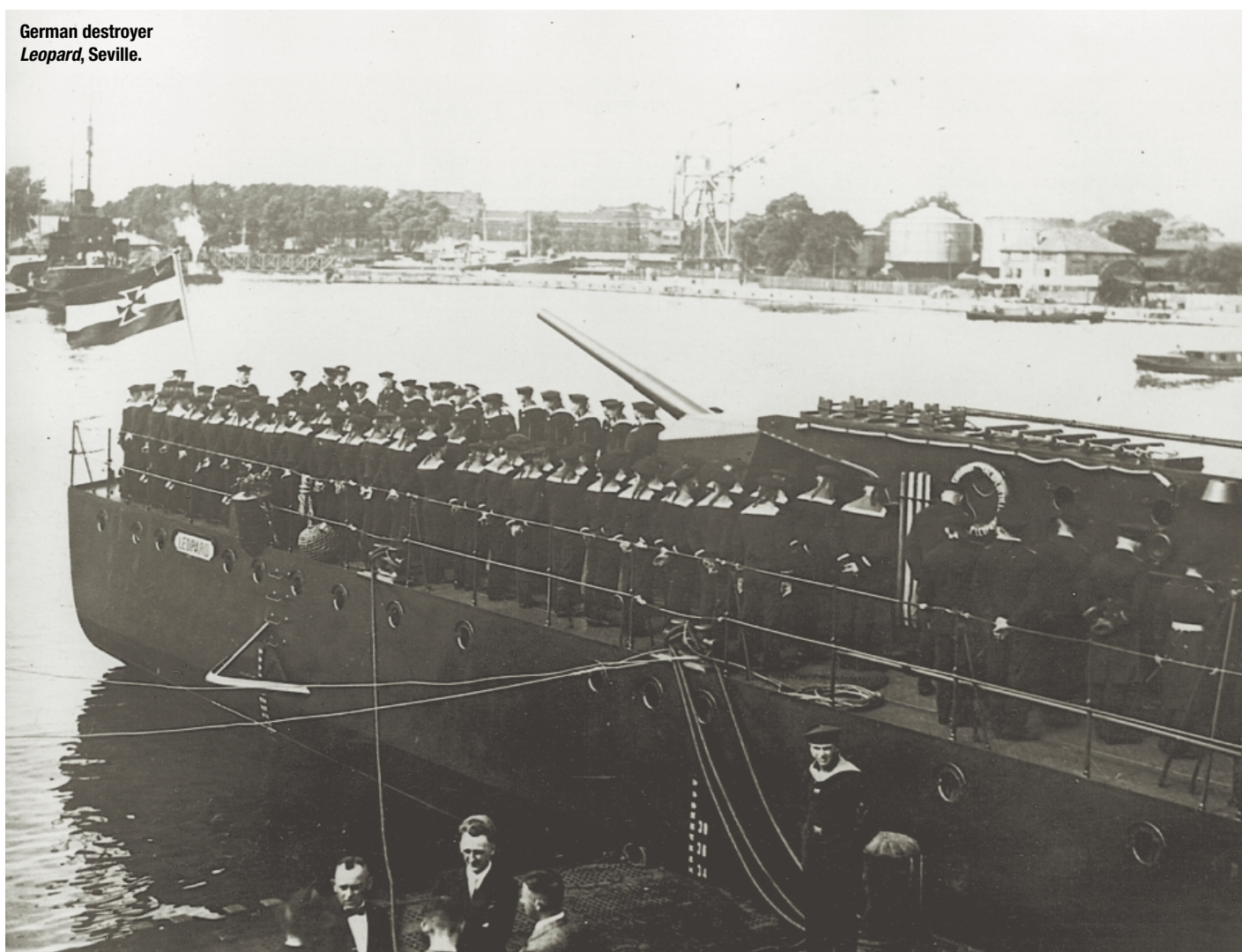
The Soviets provided a less extensive range of naval support. They lacked warships capable of operating so far from home, but that did not prevent them from contributing in a potentially decisive manner. By early September, Commodore N.G. Kuznetsov reached the Republican naval headquarters at the head of a group of advisors who essentially took over. Soviet advice,

based on the weak status of their navy and doctrine oriented toward coastal defense, radically affected the character of Republican operations, turning them from offensive sorties against Nationalist forces to limited protection of their merchant shipping.

Limiting Conflict

Soon after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, British and French leaders demonstrated that their greatest concern was not to prevent fascist expansion in Western Europe but to limit the conflict to Spain and avoid a general European war. By the beginning of August, led by Britain and France, the European powers took the first steps toward establishing the Nonintervention Committee aimed at reducing outside assistance to both sides. The committee first met in London on September 9. It attempted to determine measures to curtail the flow of arms, supplies, and volunteers to Spain in often acrimonious meetings through the autumn of 1936. On November 12, the committee adopted a control scheme based on the use of observers. After further study, it approved a more ambitious plan in January 1937, which provided for observers to patrol Spanish land frontiers with France

German destroyer
Leopard, Seville.



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and Portugal and aboard all ships of member nations sailing for Spain. Naval patrols would report all violations.

The observer mission was to take effect in March but, as with most of the committee's undertakings, the need for clarification of the agreement delayed operations. Meantime, member nations passed laws restricting merchant traffic with Spain. Great Britain, for example, adopted the British Merchant Shipping Act, which banned carrying military supplies to either side.

The control plan, with the joint nation naval patrol in place, took effect on April 20. Britain, France, Germany, and Italy contributed forces. The agreement divided the coast into patrol areas. The British and French navies would monitor the Nationalist coast and the Germans and Italians would observe Republican territories. Patrols were to report vessels of participating countries that entered their zones without notification and

without observers aboard or which refused to be searched. All the ships on patrol flew the North Seas Fisheries Commission pennant in the absence of a Nonintervention Committee emblem.

Nationalist interference with foreign shipping concerned many countries. Northern European nations, in particular, grew increasingly distressed. Between November 1936 and April 1937, 18 Dutch, 26 Danish, and 30 Norwegian ships had their cargoes confiscated. The Dutch sent a cruiser in March with orders to defend merchant ships and the Norwegians followed suit in early April. The Scandinavian countries raised the issue with the committee, suggesting that the warships of the four powers extend their protection to Scandinavian vessels with international observers aboard.



Republicans
embarking, 1936.

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Despite the calls for action, the patrols quickly devolved into ineffectiveness, and by late May the French ministry of marine noted that their efficacy was “illusory,” there being too many ways to avoid them. Increased dangers also threatened the patrol effort. On May 13, the destroyer *HMS Hunter* struck a mine off Almeria. Even more serious incidents occurred later that month. Republican planes bombed Palma, endangering patrol ships. The Italian auxiliary *Barletta* was hit with six killed. The committee met to discuss the incident two days later, on May 28, with the Italians demanding that the group reassert its authority. Meanwhile, attacks continued. A Republican bomber hit the German battleship *Deutschland* at Ivisa, killing 22. In response, on May 31 the Germans sent a cruiser and four destroyers to attack the Republican port of Almeria. The next day the

German government withdrew from the committee, declaring it would not return without assurances that there would be no repeat of Republican hostilities. Italy withdrew as well. Germany also announced that their ships had orders to repulse by force any plane or warship that approached under existing conditions.

In London and Paris many feared that general war could result from further German reprisals or open intervention in Spain. Britain formulated a plan for increased neutral zones in Spanish ports and other measures to satisfy the Germans. This scheme faltered when Germany announced that Republican submarines had attacked the cruiser *Leipzig*. Berlin demanded the internment of all Republican submarines and a

HMS Orion off Gibraltar.

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joint naval demonstration by the four powers off Valencia. The British and French doubted the reports of the submarine attacks and argued that action should not be taken without an investigation into the incident. The Germans refused to cooperate and Rome followed the lead of Berlin.

Britain and France decided to take over the entire patrol effort. They spent the summer seeking a means to reorganize operations on a more effective basis. At the end of August, a committee report on the means for restoring and improving the naval patrols concluded that the system had been extensively evaded and did not justify its cost.

Attacks in the Mediterranean continued at a relatively light pace but escalated in late August

with strikes on British, French, Russian, and Spanish shipping. Both Britain and France viewed the situation as intolerable and the British reinforced their Mediterranean squadron and ordered it to attack any submarine in the vicinity of a strike on a merchant ship. Then a submarine attack against *HMS Havock* on the night of August 30 spurred Downing Street into supporting the call for an international meeting. London had intelligence intercepts proving that Italian submarines were responsible. Neither Britain nor France, however, wished to directly accuse Italy. They did not want a head-on confrontation and hoped to involve the Italians in a new accord. On September 6, London and Paris sent joint invitations to Rome and nine other capitals, hoping to reach European consensus on deterring attacks against neutral shipping.

The Soviets proved less diplomatic and accused Italy of attacking its merchant ships. The Italians, with the Germans following suit, used this accusation as an excuse not to attend the conference. The meeting opened on September 9 in Nyon, Switzerland, despite the Italian and German refusal to participate. An agreement was signed September 14. Immediate orders went out to British and French naval forces to attack any submarine caught under the conditions outlined in the agreement.

A major issue involved which nations would take responsibility for the patrols. While the British did not expect much cooperation, the

the show of force by the British and French navies proved effective

French proved willing to provide forces. That was crucial, as the other states refused to participate in operations outside their territorial waters. The British and French agreed to patrol the entire Mediterranean. The accord placed severe restrictions on submarine operations, allotting only a few zones for exercises. The signatories also agreed to give logistic support to Britain and France, permit patrol ships to enter territorial waters in pursuit of errant submarines, and not allow foreign submarines into their territorial waters.

The Nyon agreement placed heavy burdens on the British and French; the submarine patrols required the support of 50 destroyers. The British had to commit three-fifths of their destroyer force and withdraw ships from the Nonintervention Committee patrols in Spanish waters to enforce the Nyon accord.

After the signing, London and Paris formally invited Rome to take over the Tyrrhenian Sea patrol area. Benito Mussolini agreed to modifications of the Nyon clauses to accommodate Italian involvement after the British and French essentially agreed to grant his country equal status in directing the operations. This participation boosted his international reputation and inflated the role of Italy as a Mediterranean power.

Other political implications of the agreement were also intriguing. The Soviets perceived the unwillingness to directly accuse the Italians of belligerency as yet another act of appeasement and were surprised that the patrols actually went into effect. The fascist powers, as well, did not expect that the Western powers could act in the face of their opposition. Neville Chamberlain, however, believed that the attacks at sea represented such an affront to his nation's honor that he had no choice but to take action. To not respond in the face of such a direct threat meant sacrificing

one of Britain's greatest traditions—command of the sea. Still Britain's willingness to take a stand on freedom of navigation in the Mediterranean did not suggest to the other European powers that the country would take a firm position elsewhere. Indeed, the Prime Minister proved too willing to compromise over German aggression on the continent where he concluded that, unlike the situation at sea, the British lacked both the capacity and will to act.

Nevertheless, the show of force by the British and French navies proved effective. Attacks quickly abated with 27 destroyers now constantly on station. In addition to ending submarine strikes on shipping in international waters, the Nyon patrol led to increased British and French naval cooperation. The Royal Navy decided in early January 1938 to reduce patrols in light of the absence of submarine attacks. Nationalist submarines went to sea not long after and the strikes resumed. The British rapidly reinforced their patrols and the attacks ended. London again relaxed the patrols in May 1938 and the Nyon agreement was suspended in August.

The blend of informal and formal operations, confrontation and collaboration, interventionist initiatives, and acts of containment over a long period all combined to give the naval activity during the Spanish Civil War an unusually rich complexion. They were an early example of what can be accomplished by coalitions of the willing under even the most difficult circumstances. Perhaps most of all they offer an important lesson on how nations can reach beyond the limits of their own instruments of national power to provide the forces necessary to respond to crisis and deescalate conflict.

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¹ Entry for August 30, 1936, log book, *USS Kane*, LLL-16, U.S. naval vessels, record group 24, National Archives.

² John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 116.